



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – Capital Jewish Forum

Remarks of Ambassador Bleich at the Capital Jewish Forum, Melbourne

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Thank you, Manny, for that nice introduction. The Hon. David Southwick MLA and other distinguished guests, it's a pleasure to be here with you, and an honor to be invited back to speak with the Capital Jewish Forum. I would also like to thank David Werdiger and the Jews of the CBD, and GMK Partners for hosting this event.

While there are many topics that I could cover given the events of the day – economic bail-outs in Europe, uprisings and revolts in the Middle East, the creation of the new Nation of South Sudan, the tragic shootings in Norway, developments here in the Asia-Pacific, and U.S. responses to these events – I'd like to talk about something that relates to them all: new media. Decades before the internet was born, Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase: "the medium is the message." It is truer today than ever before. Today, more and more of our communication is done on-line and through social media, and it is having effects on world events that are both great and subtle.

Diplomacy has always been a personal business. It's been said the most crucial part of international diplomacy is the last three feet. It is the distance of personal contact: one person talking to another; the distance of a hand-shake. Three feet is the critical distance where trust is measured.

I was actually told during my diplomatic training that the last three feet is the hardest part of diplomacy. I thought of this recently when I was back at the White House. I was visiting with our National Security Advisor, and on my way out of his office. I discovered something I hadn't realized about being the Vice President of the United States; which is that when you're the Vice President, you don't have your own private bathroom in the West Wing. There is a bathroom outside the National Security Advisors Office that apparently he uses. Because the door opened and out walked Vice President Biden. And he was doing that sort of thing you do after you've not perfectly dried your hands and he takes his wet hand and goes "Hey Jeff – how are ya?" And at that moment I realized what they meant, and I stuck my hand back out: "Fine, Mr. Vice President." This really is the most difficult part of diplomacy!

But those three feet matter. Today much of international diplomacy is conducted electronically, in a space without distances, where the last three feet can look exactly the



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same as the first three feet. Our statements are available to strangers in the same way as they are to old friends. And we are vulnerable to strangers as well; every person and every nation is now exposed to identity theft, to system crashes, to spying and sabotage. Indeed, the theft of electronic communications is at the heart of scandals like “News of the World” and “Wikileaks.”

And so this brave new world raises questions about how we manage our messages in an electronic age, and how we ensure that we are truly connecting with the right audiences. How do we form real friendships and bonds of trust diplomatically, and how do we identify and stop those who would breach our trust. To quote that great source of diplomacy – E-Harmony (the dating website), are we in a place where “everyone is connected, but no one is really connecting.”

We are connecting, but there are gaps and unexpected effects that we need to manage. So let me give some examples of each of these from my own recent experience with new media: (1) the election of President Obama; (2) the Arab Spring revolution; and (3) the aftermath of Wikileaks.

First, the election of President Obama shows how new media can create “the last three feet.” I know something about the election because, before joining the White House, I worked with President Obama and co-chaired his California Campaign.

As you probably know, the Obama campaign was in many ways a social media campaign – it was built largely around the web. We did this in part because we didn't have a choice. President Obama entered the race late, after all of his rivals had already formed organizations, collected endorsements, raised money, and hired the best consultants. Then-Senator Obama had enormous public appeal as a Senator and was drawing large crowds everywhere he spoke, but the conventional wisdom then was that he had started too late. The handful of very large donors had already committed to other candidates. The most influential high-profile politicians had already promised their endorsements to others. And the experienced strategists were already taken, and so he was left with guys like me.

What President Obama needed to do was connect with the people who were drawn to him – many of them had no prior political experience, were not big donors, and did not have high-profile names. But together, they could produce just as much influence. While other candidates could get 600 people to donate a hundred thousand dollars apiece, our hope was to find a million people to donate \$60 each. If he could help a million Obama supporters give \$5 a month and know it mattered, he could be competitive.



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Likewise, without the endorsement of influential political leaders, he needed to find a different kind of opinion leader - the person in your school or your office or your church who people trust, who they listen to. He needed to find more of those people and help them amplify their voices.

In short, President Obama saw all of the new media tools—Facebook, Twitter, SMS, Flickr, MySpace, YouTube, the website - from the vantage point of a community organizer rather than as a traditional political campaigner. He saw them as ways to reach and mobilize more supporters, rather than simply as a medium for getting his campaign's message out or for gathering donations. Our job was to make the experience as much like the real world experience of meeting then-Senator Obama as possible. It was the way to get to the final three feet.

Community organizers believe in face-to-face conversation because they know that most people need some personal contact to become passionate about an issue.

People went to barackobama.com not only to watch campaign videos, read press releases, and send donations, but also to connect with others – to form a community. It was a space to meet other people who cared about the issues of the campaign the way you did. You could exchange ideas, share videos, shop for Obama gear, enlist others to contribute, create your own profile page.

So the Obama campaign used community building tools in the virtual world just as they would have in the real world. The experience was the same in many ways as attending a large rally – you saw people who shared your views, you heard endorsements from people in your community, you listened to the President's own messages, and you had a chance to discuss what you'd seen, to share it with others, and to support it. It gave individuals the ability to have a personal stake in the race—to be part of a community, to help shape a brand, to break down social barriers.

The numbers tell the story of the success of this strategy. More than 2 million profiles were created on MyBarackObama.com. 200,000 offline events were planned, over 400,000 blog posts were written, over 3 million calls were made in the final four days of the campaign alone using MyBO's virtual phone banking platform. And this was just on MyBO. Candidate Obama had 5 million supporters in other social media, and maintained a profile in more than 15 online communities. His email list contained over 13 million addresses. To put it in perspective, four years earlier, the Democratic nominee, John Kerry, had 3 million email addresses. Ultimately 3 million donors made 6.5 million donations online. Of those 6.5 million donations—6 million were for \$100 or less. Every one of these numbers is a handshake. And so it is clear that correctly used, people on



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social media are not merely connected – they are connecting. They have the power to transform. In short, that effort took people and who had no opportunity to meet candidate Obama and brought them just three feet away.

At the same time, we need to be careful not to exaggerate the power of media to transform. We've seen this most clearly in coverage of the people-powered revolutions in the Middle East.

Media were quick to dub the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt as the twitter revolutions. But this overstates the role of the media. Revolutions are not caused by how we communicate any more than Obama's success was caused by his choice of media. Ultimately, it can help bring you three feet away, but it always comes down to the quality of the message whether people will agree or walk away.

The things that caused the Revolution in Tunisia are the things that always cause revolutions. Oppression. Repression. Inequality. Lack of opportunity. A government that simply loses touch with the basic needs of its citizens. Facebook does not cause dissent; conditions and people do. What social media can do is accelerate how quickly people organize, and it can amplify their voices.

So, it won't cause revolutions, but it can have a profound effect on the speed of revolutions and their aftermath.

First, social media dramatically accelerated the pace of the Arab Spring revolts – things that normally would take six, 12, 18 months to occur – where diplomats would be hearing the beat of the drums and writing cables back home- took only six weeks. And so it caught world leaders off guard and it even caught the movement itself by surprise.

Organizing a rally or a protest in a repressive society used to be a difficult, secretive, and private matter. Now, with social media, this could be done instantaneously. The ability to coordinate people very rapidly played a large role in the Arab Spring. People didn't have to be at home in front of a TV or waiting by the phone. Instead, people could be anywhere doing whatever they were doing and get that same information instantaneously.



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Social media tools also enabled every person on the street in Tunis to be a reporter, and accelerate change. It used to be that the trucks would pull up with the big satellite dish on top and people would run out with cameras breathing heavily. They'd have large cameras on shoulders and literally chase the story. Now everyone everywhere is a reporter. Tunisians just pulled out their cell phone, captured an image or an event and could instantaneously send it all over the world. It was the reporters and journalists who were trying to catch up with average citizens who are capturing these images in real time and making the news.

But this new speed and new power, also has some unexpected consequences. Let me give you an example. Since this is CJF, a terrific group of informed thinkers and leaders who are familiar with issues around the world, you're in a better position than most folks to answer this question: Who was the leader of the Tunisian revolution? Anyone want to take a guess?

I asked the U.S. Ambassador to Tunisia the same question. And I hope it makes you feel better that he had the same answer – no one. It didn't require a clear, charismatic leader. People en masse reached out through social media. That means there was no well-organized opposition that formed with a leader and a message. While social media served to accelerate the toppling of a repressive regime, it may also mean that the formation of new institutions will be slower. Likewise, because the pace of the revolution was faster than the ability of other nations to anticipate and adjust, it may make the formation of international bonds with the new leadership a little slower as well. Back to E-Harmony, while break-ups can happen quickly – the courtship that leads us to reach those last three feet with any new set of leaders, takes time. And the tools of diplomacy now need to adjust to this changed reality.

Finally, let me talk about how the very things that can help bring us closer, to amplify our voices, and to accelerate our adoption of good ideas, can also expose us to new challenges. Wikileaks offers an example. The proponents of Wikileaks claim that they want members of their society to know everything their government is doing and that nothing should be classified. I think our views about the wrong-headedness of this are clear, and they should be clear to any person who has ever sent their tax returns to the government or had a medical claim submitted to the government. I'm pretty sure you wouldn't want everyone to know everything the Government knows.

Wikileaks exposes a vulnerability – the challenge of controlling who hears our message and how they hear it. Even if you believe that you should know who the Australian government believes is attempting to sell nuclear weapons to a hostile nation, do you really think the world is better if the weapons dealer and the hostile nation know too?



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Wikileaks puts this information up on a website and so anyone and everyone can access this information in ways that can do great harm.

This is a caution. As I said, social media works when it resembles the real world. In real life, we control our messages. We may tell our family that we have an illness, but we don't want it broadcast to the world. But with new media, our intended audience – who we mean to talk to -- is no longer fully within our control. We may be trying to convey one point to one set group, but information in digital form can be immediately transmitted to millions of others instantaneously. Let me offer a personal example of how new media makes it more difficult to tailor messages to local communities based on local dialect, local culture, and local understandings. In the aftermath of Wikileaks, I told the media that I have a good working relationship with the current Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd. I said we talked often, they'd probably seen us walk around the lake together, and that we had, you know, a "bromance." Well, I think this made the point in Australia. On the other hand, over email I learned that "bromance" was understood differently in Germany. I think they thought we were adopting a child together. It is much more serious when the people reviewing Wikileaks are in Iran, or North Korea, or Al-Qaeda.

So from these examples, let me offer three conclusions about social media as they affect the challenges of 21st Century Diplomacy.

First, this new medium is not a magic wand—it doesn't produce results if the content isn't there. At the Embassy, we have incorporated all of these new platforms into our website: Facebook friends, Twitter tweets, YouTube videos, Flickr photos; we have a ton of those.... None of this will connect with the public if we don't have the right policies, and they don't feel they are participating in a real conversation. The last three feet is about trust and about understanding. One trap we all need to avoid is believing that the technology can generate these things. Content that would fail in other media will not magically succeed in social media.

Second, while this new media can connect with more people, it is also possible to connect with too many people too quickly. The Obama campaign and the Tunisian revolts worked in part because they relied on small, organic affinity groups. But Wikileaks demonstrates that information that is stolen can be posted indiscriminately at great risk. And even well-intentioned messages being beamed around the world, can have perverse



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effects. Something that makes sense in one setting will be interpreted all wrong in another.

Third, despite these cautions, we are long past the time when it is a question of should we or shouldn't we embrace this technology. This is the technology. This is our media. We use it best if we understand that it can be used as a new means for human beings to communicate the way they have always communicated. An online community, like a regular community, is built not on technology but on trust and sincerity. The trust and sincerity usually established by an in-person meetings can be built with new social media, depending on how the tools are used, developed, and understood, and to the extent that we all work together to prevent their abuse.

So that is my ultimate point. It is up to us to determine how we use this technology effectively to bring us closer together, to reduce misunderstanding, and to ensure that we never lose the power of those last three feet.

Thank you.